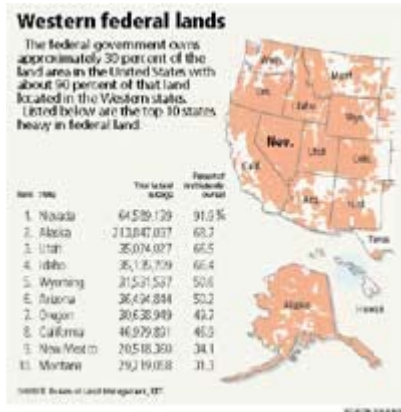


GOVERNMENT PRESENCE: Accurate accounting sought

Lawmaker wants BLM to broaden Western land disposal to aid growth

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WASHINGTON -- Western lawmakers are preparing a new push to require the federal government to take stock of its land holdings and identify areas that are no longer needed and might be sold.

"We have a lot of towns, people and ranches scattered through public lands," said Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah. "They need to expand their towns so they can grow and expand their tax base."

While the federal Bureau of Land Management each year identifies parcels to sell through joint land use planning with local communities, Cannon and other

Westerners say the effort is far from systematic and is not aggressive enough to suit them.

They contend the government doesn't have its arms around what it oversees in the West.

In Nevada, the federal government manages an estimated 64.5 million acres, or 91.9 percent of the state's landmass, the highest percentage of federal ownership in the country.

The BLM plans to sell roughly 34,880 acres this year, including highly valued land in Clark County that is embroiled in a profits dispute between the state and the Bush administration.

To the extent the BLM is selling off land this year, 86 percent of it will be in Nevada, according to agency figures.

A campaign to broaden Western land disposal is being spearheaded by Cannon, who is head of the Western Congressional Caucus. The group's 54 members often express frustration at the massive federal presence in their states.

While BLM land sales in Southern Nevada have been highly successful, caucus officials said their efforts trace to two other recent events.

The first is a proposed \$26 million reduction in federal payments to counties that cannot collect taxes on federal land.

The second is a directive in President Bush's proposed budget ordering federal agencies to survey the government's holdings in the District of Columbia.

Cannon is forming legislation that would direct the secretary of Interior to create a master property database to account for more than 671 million acres the government manages.

The Interior Department administers roughly 95 percent of federal lands, according to a 2000 report by the Congressional Research Service. Management of the remainder is scattered among the Defense Department, Energy Department and a host of other agencies.

"If you don't know what you have, how can you know what you need to keep and what you can dispose of," Cannon said. The government manages almost two-thirds of Utah.

Across the West, inspectors estimate the government is holding onto at least 5 million acres it could sell or convey to local communities, according to the General Services Administration, the federal landlord agency.

Lawmakers contend some part of that is land that could accommodate growth. By law, the BLM has retained land -- vast expanses of desert that once nobody wanted - for the public's use.

"We have such a huge, huge government land base, it's very difficult for people to identify which parcels they have," said Rep. Jim Gibbons, R-Nev., a member of the caucus who plans to co-sponsor Cannon's bill.

A case in point congressional aides said is the Interior Department's proposed budget, which estimates that the BLM manages 261 million acres on one page but 262 million acres on another page. The BLM's land sale Web page states that the agency manages 264 million acres.

At a congressional hearing this week, Interior Secretary Gale Norton said the department has taken strides to improve its financial management of more than 100 property databases across dozens of computer operating systems.

Once land is surveyed, Cannon said additional legislation might be required to sell property that might be better utilized for development. The survey process should take one to two years, he said.

In the meantime, Western lawmakers say Congress should boost funding for county reimbursements, known as the Payment in Lieu of Taxes program.

"More often than not, in the West, the federal government isn't just our neighbor, it's the entire neighborhood," Gibbons said. "Since Nevada cannot raise taxes from over 91 percent of our state, PILT funding is vital, yet the program has never been adequately funded."

Norton defended the proposed tax reimbursement cut as necessary in tight budget times. She noted that the Bush administration has boosted the program's funding by at least 60 percent since the 1990s.

"The decision to reduce PILT was a difficult one because we recognize their importance to rural counties," Norton said.